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ABSTRACT

This booklet contains information on how to set up a Pen Friends project, a nationwide, intergenerational writing project that pairs a class of junior of senior high school students with a group of older adults in the same community. The booklet notes that participants establish a relationship through letter writing based on visits to a local cultural resource. It describes how to choose a local cultural site and contains motivational writing activities, activity sheets, forms for scheduling and recording, and a program evaluation. The booklet is organized around the 10 steps of the project: (1) finding a group of writing partners; (2) selecting a cultural site to visit; (3) planning the calendar and keeping records; (4) letter writing warm-up activities; (5) writing a letter of introduction; (6) and (7) visiting a cultural site and writing letters (first visit); (8) introducing the writing partners face-to-face; (9) evaluating the project; and (10) sharing the project with others. An appendix presents five additional creative letter writing activities; a four-item annotated bibliography is attached.) (RS)

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ED 412 548

Pen Friends

An Intergenerational Letter Writing Project

National Postal Museum
Smithsonian Institution

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An Overview

Pen-Friends Across the Nation **is a nationwide, intergenerational writing project. It pairs a class of junior or senior high school students with a group of older adults in the same community. Participants establish a relationship through letter writing based on visits to a local cultural resource. The correspondence between the older adults and students describes and interprets their respective experiences. The project involves an exchange of three letters which concludes in a meeting, if possible. The curriculum kit contains information on how to set up an intergenerational project, including how to choose a local cultural site. It contains motivational writing activities, activity sheets, forms for scheduling and recording, and a program evaluation. To obtain information or a curriculum packet call (202) 357-2991. These materials are also available on America OnLine (keyword Smithsonian, once inside Smithsonian Online, materials are available under Smithsonian Education), or the Internet address is: ftp to educate.si.edu.**

PREpare

PREPARING
for the Pen-Friend Project

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Step 2 Selecting a cultural site(s) to visit

Step 3 Planning the calendar and keeping records

DO

DOING
the Pen-Friend Project

Step 4 letter writing warmup activities including reading historic letters

Step 5 Writing a letter of introduction

Step 6 Visiting a cultural site and writing letters—first visit

Step 7 Visiting a cultural site and writing letters—second visit

conCLUDE

CONCLUDING
the Pen-Friend Project

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Step 10 Sharing the project with others

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For students, this program will:

Give them a chance to learn how to write interesting letters from experienced letter writers

Provide exposure to a local cultural resource

Offer the opportunity to discuss the community cultural site with people who may have experienced it at another time in history

Give them the undivided attention, and often the affection, of an older person

For adults, the program will:

Encourage intergenerational communication

Give them a chance to model letter writing skills for a generation largely unused to letter writing

Promote mental health by introducing or reacquainting older adults with a community cultural resource

Foster feelings of self-worth as older adults share their insights with adolescents

Educational objectives for all *Pen-Friend* participants:

Write for an authentic purpose and audience

Practice letter writing skills

Revise their writing for appropriateness to audience as well as mechanical correctness

Discuss and write about cultural artifacts

Finding a group of writing partners

Step 1

Guiding principles for intergenerational programming

Discuss the assumptions your group might have about the other group.

Give participants time to discuss the assumptions they might have about members of the older or younger group. Then discuss whether those assumptions are valid. Help each group consider the kinds of life events older adults and students experience, the biological changes during these two phases of life, and each group's impressions of the other group's world. Discuss each group's expectations of respect and the different forms that respect will take during the project.

Encourage personal relationships.

The Pen Friend project is designed to encourage one-to-one relationships, and to reinforce the idea that participants are communicating with individuals, not just members of a group.

Reflect on early assumptions.

At the end of the project, be sure to ask participants how the Pen Friend experience has made them reevaluate the assumptions they made at the start. Invite them to consider how their writing partner influenced the way they saw the cultural site. Ask them if their Pen Friend experience differed from what they expected. Ample time for reflection during the project will also improve the quality of the letters pen friends write.

Finding Pen-Friend partners in your community

For groups in the Washington, D.C. area, call the National Postal Museum at (202) 357-2991 to obtain more information. If you do not live near Washington, D.C., here are some ways you might locate older adults or students to join you in the Pen Friend project.

To find older adults in your area, consider:

- Senior centers—contact the program director.
- Church groups.
- Local chapters of national groups for senior citizens, such as the American Association of Retired Persons.
- Clubs that bring together groups of people from the same culture, such as the Swedish-American Club.

To find students in your area, consider:

- Public and private schools—contact the principal or English department chairperson.
- Church groups—contact the youth programs director.
- Boy and Girl Scouts or 4-H clubs.
- Community center or park district programs—contact the youth programs director.

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Selecting A Cultural Site to Visit

Step 2

Discovering your community's cultural institutions

Most people think of museums when they think of cultural institutions or cultural resources. However, your community has many other cultural resources that could serve as the centerpiece of your Pen-Friend project.

To find the cultural resources in your community, consult:

- The phone book
- The chamber of commerce
- The librarian
- Travel associations

Planning this project will be easier if you use a broader concept of cultural institution. You may consider the following cultural resources as you plan letter writing experiences:

- Nature center
- State park
- Ballpark
- Landmark—both natural and man-made
- Unusual architecture in your community
- Cemetery
- Architecturally or ethnically significant neighborhood
- Railroad station
- Library
- Retail business or restaurant
- Local newspaper
- Local industry
- University, which may contain a museum, archive, laboratory, or other scholarly resource
- Science center
- Government agency which may house archives or plan educational programs
- County fair
- Parade
- Ethnic festival
- Sporting event

Some criteria for choosing a cultural institution

1. Will participants be able to write each other letters about their personal experiences that relate to the cultural institution?
2. Did the older generation experience this site or a similar one during their teenage years?
3. How does the cultural resource relate to school curricula? Consider both subject matter and skills. For example, will Pen-Friend students have the opportunity to improve their writing or critical thinking skills?

Collaborating with the institution's educators

Before you begin planning your Pen-Friend project, find out whether the cultural institution has an education director or education department. If it does have an available educator or volunteer, he or she will be able to help you a great deal.

They might provide educational materials as a foundation for the intergenerational letter writing program. Ask the educators to share the curriculum materials and activities they currently use with visitors. This way, you may tailor activities to the needs of the older adults and students, instead of generating original activities yourself.

Perhaps the educators could supply you with historical letters from your own community to use during your Pen-Friend project.

The cultural institution may want to work with you to promote your project with a small exhibit or a news press release about your letter exchange based on their site.

Planning the calendar and keeping records

Step 3

Planning the calendar

Week 1	Introduce the Pen-Friends project. Participants (older adults and students) do the warm-up exercises in Step 4—Letter writing warm-up activities. Note: you may take more than one week for this period of preparation.
Week 2	Students write and send letters introducing themselves to their senior writing partners. (student letter #1)
Week 4	Older adults receive students' letters of introduction, then write a letter introducing themselves to the students. (senior letter #1)
Week 6	Older adults make their first visit to the cultural institution. They write and send letters to the students about their visit. (senior letter #2)
Week 8	Students receive older adults' letters about their first visit to the cultural institution.
Week 9	Students' make their first visit to the cultural institution. They write and send letters about their visit to the cultural institution (student letter #2)
Week 11	Students' make their second visit to the cultural institution. They write and send letters about their visit to the cultural institution. (student letter #3)
Week 13	Older adults make their second visit to the cultural institution, then they answer students' letters. (senior letter #3)
Week 15	A meeting, if possible. Both groups gather at the cultural institution, school, or senior center for a face-to-face meeting.

Correspondence Form

Pen Friends Across the Nation

Correspondence Partners	Letters # 1 Sent	Letters # 1 Rec.	Letters # 2 Sent	Letters # 2 Rec.	Letters # 3 Sent	Letters # 3 Rec.
Students						
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Step 3

Keeping records

Letter Writing Warm up Activities

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Step 4

Letter-related discussion topics

Choose as many of these warm-ups as you think will help participants get ready to become pen friends. There are additional choices in Appendix A on page 23.

Are You a Letter Writer?

Open a general discussion of participants' letter writing habits. Ask them whether they currently write letters or if they wrote more letters in the past. Ask: "What role, if any, has letter writing played in your life?"

An Appropriate Letter

Discuss the idea of audience in letter writing: "How does a writer write an 'appropriate letter' to a pen friend in this project?

Types of Letters

Ask participants to bring in all different kinds of letters, such as personal letters, business letters, letters of complaint, or solicitation letters. Label and post each different kind. Use the display to discuss how letters are alike or different, and what makes a good letter.

Activities to motivate letter writers

Choose from the following activities or refer to Appendix A for more activities for letter writers.

A Letter From Home

Ask participants to bring in a photocopy of a significant letter they, their parents, or their children have saved. (Don't let those valuable originals leave home.) Ask volunteers to read the letters or excerpts, aloud to the group, and to describe the letter writer and explain the circumstances that led to the letter. After hearing and discussing individual letters, invite the group to discuss the following questions:

1. What role has letter writing played in your family's history?
2. Who is the best (or most frequent) letter writer in your family?
3. Would relationships in your family change if the members wrote more letters?

Letters to Yourself

To encourage candor in letter writing, participants write letters to themselves. They could write to themselves in the present, past, or future. They could choose a specific reason for writing. For example, they could use the letter to tell themselves the truth about something, or to "discuss" something with themselves.

A Week in My Life

Ask participants to choose a real person to write to—a friend or relative. Then ask them to write a "week in the life of me" letter. Have them use a notebook to gather a week's worth of events, ideas, and images, then condense their week's gatherings into one letter.

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[April 1967]

Dear Ma,

How are things back in the World? I hope all is well! Things are pretty much the same. Vietnam has my feelings on a seesaw.

This country is so beautiful, when the sun is shining on the mountains, farmers in their rice paddies, with their water buffalo, palm trees, monkeys, birds and even the strange insects. For a fleeting moment I wasn't in a war zone at all, just on vacation, but still missing you and the family.

There are a few kids who hang around, some with no parents. I feel so sorry for them. I do things to make them laugh. And they call me "dinky dow" (crazy). But it makes me feel good. I hope that' is one reason why we're here, to secure a future for them. It seems to be the only justification I can think of for the things that I have done!

Love to all.

Your son,
George

PFC George Williams served with Company B, 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry (Rangers), 1st Infantry Division, operating in III Corps, from February 1967 to February 1968. He is now a retired firefighter living in Brooklyn, New York.

Letter courtesy of George Williams

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Reading Historic Letters

DO

HANDout

Mary Stephenson wrote to her family in Sweden from her American home in New Sweden, Iowa on June 15, 1865.

Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. Handwritten transcription.

New Sweden, Iowa, June 15, 1865

Dear parents, sisters, and brothers:

I will again write to you and thank you for the welcome letter which we read so eagerly. The week your letter came we were in anxious expectation, as I dreamed many times about Sweden and about you. I always dream about you before your letters arrive. You may rest assured that your letters are read with eagerness, and it is with joy that we learn that you are in good health and are prospering. I am a little disappointed that sister Sophia does not come—we would have happy times together. But this prospect has faded since her fiance doesn't want to leave. Now I am in hopes that Johanna will get the "American fever."

Oliver speaks a great deal of moving to Sweden, but I don't favor it, as I have things as good as I could wish. The only thing that could induce me to go to Sweden is the pleasure of being with you. Uncle and Aunt say that we may expect you, but we do not want to insist. We will soon make our decision, and we wish you would write as soon as possible whether you have any thoughts of coming to America. In our next letter we will inform you of our plans, but I do not believe that I can leave this place until death takes me away. We live better than the people in Sweden, and we are not wanting in spiritual food. When I compare conditions here with those in Sweden, we are fortunate. We have good bread and wheat flour and as much beef and pork as we desire for each meal. We have all the butter, eggs, and milk we need. Last summer I sold twenty dozen eggs every two weeks. Last fall we made a barrel and a half of good sugar syrup for cooking fruit. Last summer I cooked cherries in syrup...We have an abundance of various kinds of apples. In fact, we have so many things that make for comfort and happiness that, when I compare Sweden to this country, I have no desire to return. But, on the other hand, when I think about Sweden's healthful climate and how pleasant it would be for us to be together, I confess that I am a little dissatisfied, especially since Gustaf passed away. It is a joy to see my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, but they have sold their farm, and it is hard to say where they will move. Oliver's younger sister Christine married an American last fall, and they moved to a town called Pella.

I will write what we are doing. Oliver is plowing corn, and I am busy sewing dresses. I intend to spin soon. We have about thirty pounds of wool, half of which I am going to have spun by machine and the remainder I am going to spin by hand. I am going to weave clothes for Oliver, and I intend to sell some cloth. Last fall I sold cloth to my nearest neighbor for two dollars per yard. She expected her daughter and son-in-law last summer, but the daughter and her two children died on the journey...

The early part of the winter was severe, but after Christmas the weather was fine. We have just had a good rain, and everything looks fine.

I will close this letter with cordial greetings to my father and mother, brothers and sisters, and relatives.

Mary Stephenson

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1. What motivated these correspondents to write to each other? (Try to answer this question in several ways.)

2. Does the letter contain a question?

3. Does the letter include an anecdote, (a short description of an interesting experience)?

4. Does the letter offer a response to ideas or questions in the other person's letter?

5. What feelings does the letter convey?

6. What might the writer have felt while writing this letter? What might the reader have felt while reading it?

7. What attitudes about older or younger people are implied (or explicit) in these letters?

8. What information do you gather when you "read between the lines"?

Step 5

Writing a letter of introduction

Before students (or older adults) begin writing their letters of introduction, ask them what kind of information they would like to know about their writing partner. Brainstorm a list of all the things they might include in the first letter they write to someone they have never met. Encourage them to think of ways to make the letter interesting and engaging as well as informative.

Distribute copies of the class list of first-letter ideas to students, or distribute copies of the *Letter Idea Sheet*. Remind students that they need not answer every question on the list.

HANDout

DO

Letter Idea Sheet

Here is a short history of my letter writing habits, including when and to whom I like to write letters, and what kind of information I usually put in letters:

Things I can tell you about myself:

The three words that first come to mind when describing myself are:

My hobbies are:

In school (at work, in my free time) I like to:

My family includes:

The person I'm closest to is:

My friends are:

When we're together we like to:

The books I've read and movies I've seen lately:

This is what disturbs me or impresses me in current events or politics:

A story or a joke you'll like:

I am excited about participating in this Pen-Friend project because:

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DO

Visiting a Cultural Site and Writing Letters

Steps 6&7

A basic approach to planning

Once you have chosen a cultural institution to visit, you will begin planning participants' experiences during their visits. One of the most powerful aspects of the Pen-Friend project is that participants write and receive letters about a significant experience they have shared.

Whether you plan to visit the same location twice or visit two different sites, follow this basic approach to planning participants' experiences at the cultural institution: give them something to think about, something to see, something to do, and a way of writing about their experience.

Four steps to planning a visit to a cultural institution

These four steps are broad enough to be useful for planning visits to nearly any cultural institution in any community. After each step (in italics) is an example of what participants in the National Postal Museum's pilot project did during their first visit to the museum.

1.

Before going to the site, ask participants a thought-provoking question that their visit will enable them to answer.
Participants were asked: Have you ever moved from a place you knew to one you didn't? Suppose someone offered you the opportunity to go to a place where life might be much better than it currently is. Would you leave your home forever for a place that is supposed to be much better?

2.

Shape participants' visit to the site so what they see and do during their visit helps them answer the question they were asked in Step 1. Select specific galleries, displays or places to visit, ones that will help participants focus on the question.
During their visit to the National Postal Museum, participants met first to discuss the question about a new place. They were guided to those parts of the museum which would help them answer the question. They read copies of historical letters written by immigrants and people who moved from the east coast to the west.

3.

Provide them with a way to record their observations during the visit. Give participants a copy of the *Idea Saver* handout to take with them. The *Idea Saver* will help them stretch their imaginations and articulate and organize their thoughts. (Also see the *Graphic Organizer* handout.)
Participants used a graphic organizer to record their impressions and answers to the question. They paused frequently during the guided tour to take notes.

4.

Help participants convert their notes and reactions into a letter. Distribute copies of the *Letter Analysis Sheet* to help the Pen-Friends compose their letters.
Participants considered the following questions before writing:
Which thoughts and feelings will you share with your Pen-Friend?
What might your Pen-Friend want to know about before visiting the museum?
How can your letter help your Pen-Friend get to know you better?

Cultural Institution

Describe the place. Consider architecture, light, space, environment. Include at least three details that you noticed but others might have missed.

Describe one object or artifact you saw while visiting this place. Write why you chose to describe this artifact.

Who created this place? What were their goals in creating it? (If you don't know the actual answers to these questions, try to conclude from what you see.)

What feeling does this place give you?

What is the importance of this place to its community?

What sounds or scents or smells did you notice?

What is one humorous aspect of this site?

What surprised you most about this place or about one object or item you encountered in this place?

What was your most memorable experience at this site?

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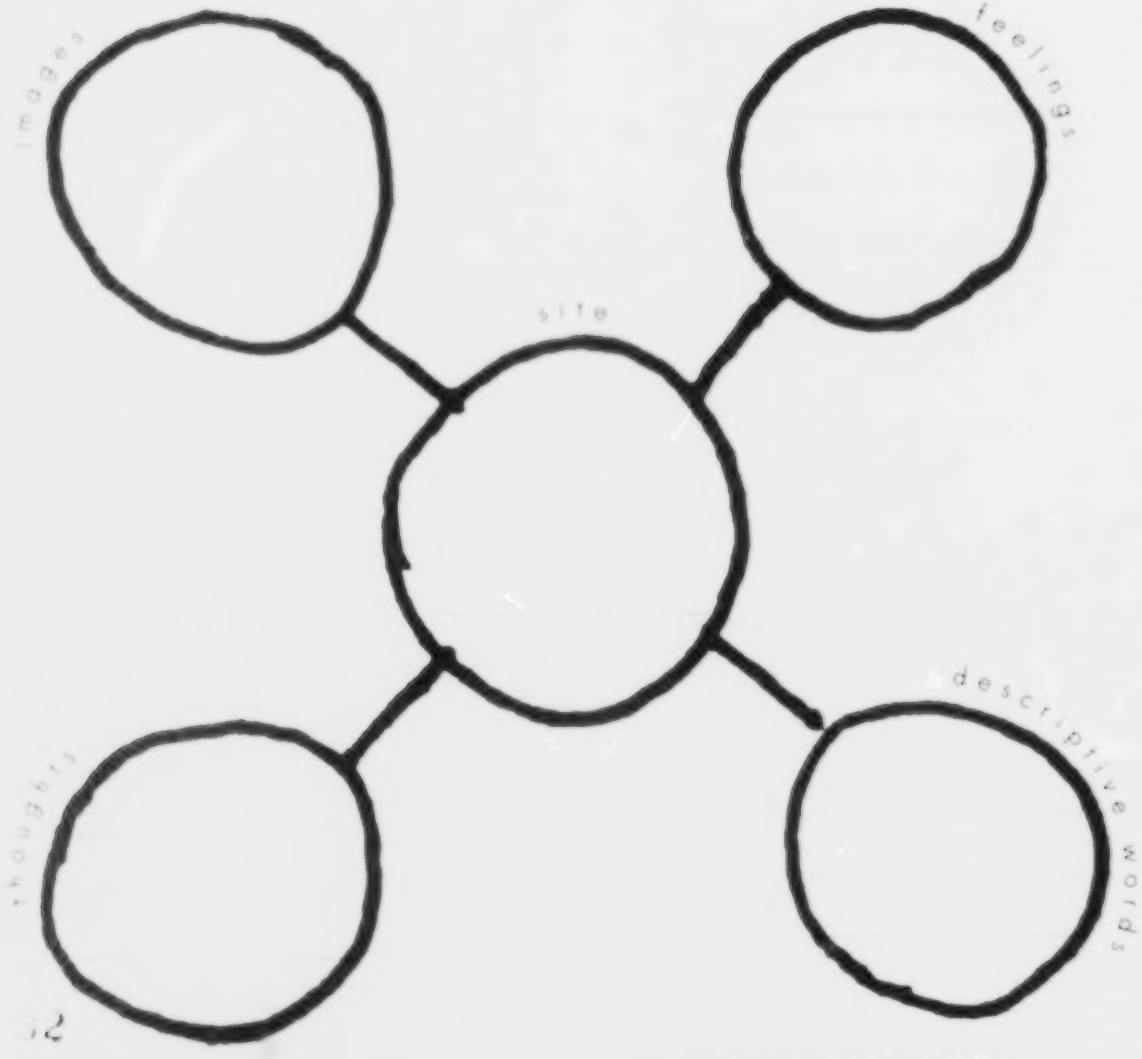
HANDout

DO

Graphic Organizer for Recording Reactions During a Visit



Pen Friends Across the Nation

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Concluding the Project

Step 8

Introducing writing partners face-to-face

If possible, try to organize a meeting in which the writing partners have an opportunity to meet each other. This meeting will be very exciting and powerful for the partners. It will give them a chance to discuss what their correspondence has meant personally and as a group. If the partners intend to continue writing to each other, this final meeting will give planners a chance to find out how they can support the ongoing correspondence.

The final meeting provides a chance to take photographs, or plan an exhibit of letters or an anthology. During the final meeting, partners should be given time to walk around and talk individually. If the meeting takes place at the cultural institution involved in the project, writing partners might want to visit favorite parts together.

Step 9

Evaluating the project

While every one is gathered, involve them in filling out the evaluation form (on the next page.) Explain that the evaluation will help the National Postal Museum document the success of the project and support other groups of writing partners in the future. Mail the form back to: Pen-Friends, Education Department, National Postal Museum, 2 Massachusetts Avenue, NE, Washington, D.C. 20560

Step 10

Sharing the project with others

Let others know about your Pen-Friend project. Some "good press" may help you attract attention and resources to sustain the correspondence or to repeat the project in years to come.

Contact your local newspaper, radio station, or public access cable television station with information about the project. Invite them to attend the final meeting.

Create a bulletin board displaying excerpts of participants' letters and photographs taken during the project. (You will need to get participants' written permission before you use their letters.)

Create an anthology of excerpts from participants' letters. Display a letter and the answer it received on facing pages. Consider including participants' comments about what the project meant to them in the anthology.

Project Evaluation

1. What did you enjoy about writing to and receiving letters from your Pen Friend?

2. What did you enjoy about your visits to the cultural institution?

3. Did your writing partner's letters affect how you saw the cultural institution? How did the letters broaden or change your point of view?

4. Did the letters help you "meet" your writing partner in a way that conversation would not have accomplished?

5. Will you continue to write to your pen friend? yes no

6. What suggestions can you make to improve the program?

7. Are you motivated to write more letters to friends, family, or other people as a result of this program?

yes no Please explain your answer.

8. Check one:

I am a student from

(SCHOOL / COMMUNITY / CLUB)

I am a senior from

(COMMUNITY / CLUB)

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Appendix A

Listed below are additional creative letter writing activities These letter writing activities can be used before or during the Pen-Friends project:

Create Your Own Stationery
Invite students to design their own stationery and use it in their Pen-Friends correspondence.

Similes and Metaphors
After discussing letter writing and letter receiving, the group generates metaphors and similes for a letter. "A letter is a ___" or "A letter is like a ___." These could be posted on a bulletin board during the Pen-Friends project.

Letter Menu
The class creates a "Letter Menu" with several choices in the following categories: salutation, closing, newsy statements, and questions. Students write imaginary letters by choosing items from each category in the Letter Menu.

Pieces of the Whole
Give students some pieces of a letter—a few sentences, a greeting and closing—and ask them to write the whole letter.

Working Letters
Create a handout containing letter writing advice from business and technical writing handbooks. Discuss what students can learn about personal letter writing from these books.

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Credits

***Pen-Friends Across the Nation* was created by the Education Department of the National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution**

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